

# FISHER BUILDING



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Room 516  
320 N. Clark Street  
Chicago, Illinois 60610  
(312) 744-3200

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HISTORICAL AND ARCHITECTURAL LANDMARKS

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A photograph of the Fisher Building taken before the 1907 addition was built.

FISHER BUILDING  
343 South Dearborn Street

D. H. Burnham and Company, architects

Completed in 1896

Designated a Chicago Landmark on June 7, 1978.

*Staff for this publication*

Suzan von Lengerke Kehoe, *writer and designer*  
Kathleen Gross, *production assistant*

Inside the modernized Dearborn Street entrance of the Fisher Building, three of the glass panels of the original 1896 vestibule doors are each incised with an ornamental fish. This whimsical decoration is just one of many aquatic details which form visual puns on the name of the building's original owner, Lucius G. Fisher. The eighteen-story steel-frame building which bears his name is faced with richly modeled pale salmon-colored terra cotta. The profusion of ornamental detail distinguishes this building from the other Chicago school buildings along Dearborn Street and illustrates the high degree of creativity which could be reached within the idiom of this style.

The Fisher Building is located at 343 South Dearborn Street amidst a concentration of office buildings. The area was developed in the late nineteenth century as an outgrowth of the commercial expansion taking place further north in the Loop. The South Dearborn Street area, residential until the early 1880s, lay directly between the growing business district and the railway terminus which helped feed it. Printers and other subsidiary businesses, supported by the commercial trade of the city, needed conveniently located office space, and developers were quick to see that the area north of the Dearborn Street Station was ripe for development. In this period of rapid growth, in order to make their investments profitable, developers adopted certain precepts: expediency, efficiency, and practicality. These dictates profoundly influenced the designs of the Chicago school of architecture.

A photograph of the Fisher Building (right) viewed with the south half of the Monadnock Block (left) in the background. (Barbara Crane, photographer)



Although the 1907 addition contains no oriel windows and is taller than the original building, the two structures are united by similarity of scale and design. (Barbara Crane, photographer)

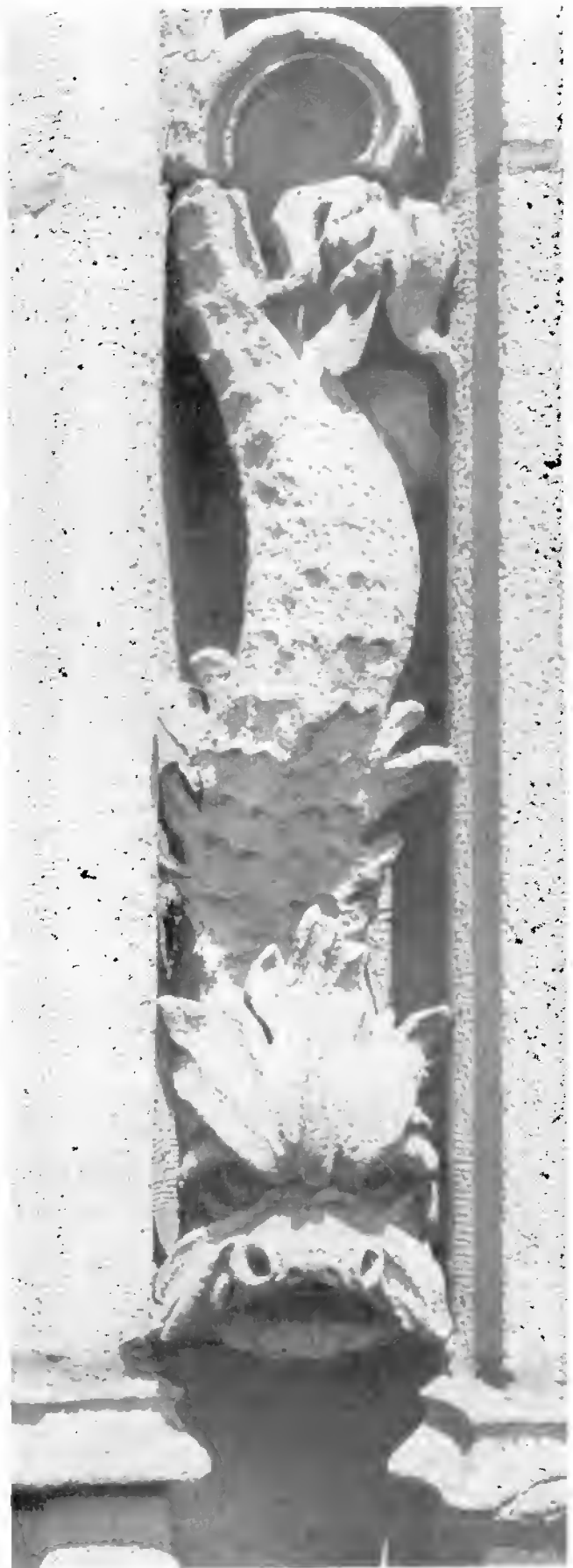
The Chicago school style blossomed following the demonstration by William Le Baron Jenney that a building could be supported on a steel frame. This engineering technology eliminated the necessity for heavy masonry walls, and thus made it possible for buildings to be constructed not only quickly and economically, but also to reach greater heights. The architecture of the Chicago school tended to be functional and straightforward, the designs prescribed by the internal skeletal framework. The surface of that exterior wall which had once been necessary for support eventually decreased as the window area between the structural elements increased. The buildings along South Dearborn illustrate vividly this evolution of style. The north half of the Monadnock, designed by Burnham and Root in 1889 and still standing at 53 West Jackson Boulevard, represents the culmination of the earlier masonry wall-bearing type of construction. As an exceptionally simple yet elegant design, it is a prelude to the mature Chicago school style. The Fisher Building, diagonally across the street, illustrates the newer concept formulated by the Chicago school: the structure is supported internally, and the walls become a decorative glass curtain hanging on the framework. It thus points the way to the modern glass towers of the present.

D. H. Burnham and Company was the architectural firm chosen to design the Fisher Building. Daniel Burnham had established his reputation as one of the earliest and most prominent architects of the Chicago school. He began his architectural career as an apprentice in the firm of Sanford Loring and William Le Baron Jenney; the latter is generally regarded as the father of modern, steel-frame, commercial architecture. Burnham gained further but brief experience while employed with John Mills Van Osdel and in partnership with Gustave Laureau before joining the office of Carter, Drake and Wight in 1872. As a draftsman for this firm, Burnham made the acquaintance of John Wellborn Root, another member of the staff. In 1873 Burnham and Root decided to start practicing for themselves in a partnership which lasted until Root's death in January of 1891 at age forty-one. The association of the two men proved successful, particularly after 1880, and the firm was awarded numerous commissions both in Chicago and elsewhere. Root was regarded as the chief designer. Burnham and Root barely had time to master the architecture of steel framing before the latter's untimely death. The fundamentals were carried on by the firm, and it expanded to become unquestionably the largest architectural office in Chicago.

Between 1891 and 1896, Burnham consolidated his prosperous firm; its organization became a prototype of the modern corporate architectural firm. D. H. Burnham and Company had offices in New York and San Francisco as well as Chicago.

Charles B. Atwood, who joined the company in April, 1891, was placed in charge of design and was undoubtedly very involved in the work on the Fisher Building. In 1894, Atwood completed plans for one of the firm's most innovative structures, the Reliance Building at 32 North State Street; it is strikingly similar to the Fisher which was built two years later. Both have an extraordinarily high proportion of window area relative to the spandrels and piers which establish the exterior wall surface. Both buildings make extensive use of glazed terra cotta and display Atwood's penchant for neo-Gothic decoration. Although the profusion of traditional detail on the Fisher is a reversion to an historic motif, the building is structurally quite advanced.

Edward C. Shankland, a partner in D. H. Burnham's firm from 1894 until 1898, designed the structural system of the Fisher Building. As an engineer he was responsible for much of the development of steel construction and improved foundation design in the last years of the nineteenth century. The Fisher Building is considered a prime example of Shankland's technical virtuosity. The entire structure is supported on skeletal steel columns riveted together to form continuous rigid supports from top to bottom. These joints were fitted in the shop to avoid delay on the site. Shankland's supervision in this and other matters produced a high degree of engineering efficiency. As a result seventeen stories of steelwork in the Fisher Building were completed within a month; the top thirteen



*Right: The creatures which decorate the Fisher Building are reminiscent of gargoyles on a Gothic cathedral.*  
(Suzan von Lengerke Kehoe, photographer)

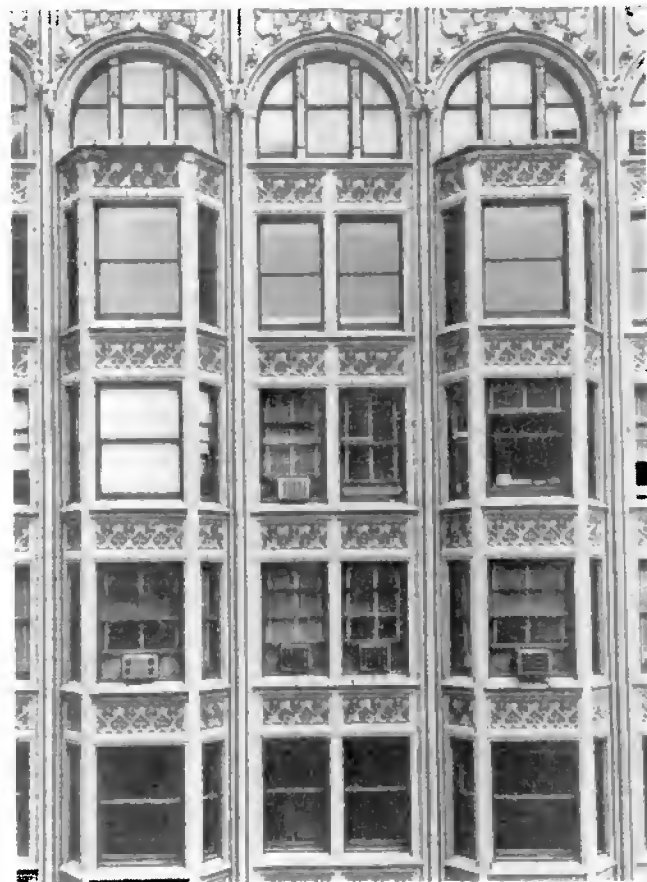
erected in only fourteen days. This record demonstrated the well-developed construction methods of Burnham's firm. The building was occupied in just nine months after ground breaking!

The high level of general structural proficiency displayed in the Fisher Building was coupled with several specific technical advances. A unique feature was the use of twenty-five foot piles under the spread foundations, thereby consolidating the bearing soil. This was done in order to accommodate the high pressure on the footings, which was 6,000 pounds per square foot. Up until 1896, the normal building loads were less, because most structures did not reach a height of eighteen stories, and such deeply-driven piles were therefore not necessary.

The Fisher Building was, at the time of its construction, one of the tallest commercial buildings in the world and was erected almost entirely without brickwork. The only brick used was that which backed some of the terra-cotta panels that sheathed the three "formal" facades of the original building (facing Van Buren, Dearborn, and Plymouth.) This ingenious use of terra cotta, lighter weight than brick, was designed in part to reduce the load on the bearing framework. The rear wall to the north was built of hollow building tile.

The pale salmon-colored terra cotta covering the steel framework serves as both fireproofing and protection against the elements. The flat steel arches supporting the floors were also fireproofed with a sheathing of hollow fire-clay tile. This extraordinary use of terra-cotta facing which appeared in both the Reliance and the Fisher buildings was considered a novelty at the time of construction, and the buildings were deemed entirely fireproof. Visually it was a novelty as well. The terra cotta did not presume to imitate stone; it merely followed the steel supporting members, leaving two-thirds of the exterior surface to be filled in with glass. This created a vivid impression, and in May of 1896, *Inland Architect* pronounced it "a building without walls!"

**A photograph of Hannah and Hogg's, a bar in the Fisher Building.**  
(Courtesy of the Chicago Historical Society)



**The extensive window area of the Fisher Building makes it a direct precursor of many of today's high-rise buildings.**  
(Barbara Crane, photographer)

The Fisher Building, as it stands today, is composed of two distinct sections. The larger original portion fronted on Van Buren Street and was five bays wide and eight bays long. An annex to the north added three more bays to the length, making a total of eleven bays, north to south. The addition, completed in 1907, was designed by architect Peter J. Weber; E. C. Shankland, no longer with D. H. Burnham and Company, was again the engineer. Although the annex is two stories higher, its design is remarkably in keeping with the earlier work.

In the original eighteen-story building, the first two floors form a base with a two-story decorative entrance on the south (Van Buren Street) side. Simpler entrances exist off center on both the Dearborn Street facade and on the Plymouth Court side. The ground level contains shop windows while the second has generous areas of glass allowing a great deal of light into the space behind, originally a banking room. The third through sixteenth stories are identical; here flat bays alternate with projecting bays. In this section all windows are double-hung. Every other bay forms a trapezoidal oriel where a central window is flanked by two narrower ones. The flat bays are filled with pairs of nicely proportioned window openings. The seventeenth story has a flat surface where arched triplets of double-hung windows provide a visual termination for the tiers of glass

below. Above this arcade motif, the eighteenth story contains three double-hung windows in each bay. Elaborate terra-cotta tracery above them is surmounted by an equally ornate cornice.

The Fisher Building was quite tall and narrow by contemporary standards, and the design of all facades reinforces this slab-like effect. The vertical elements, reflecting the structural system beneath, are dominant. The piers run uninterrupted through the main portion of the building and unite to form the arcade motif on the seventeenth floor. The relatively narrow mullions of the oriel windows rise unbroken through the spandrels. In the flat bays the mullions pause only at the sill lines of the windows, where they are intersected by the moldings. Every trapezoidal bay contains only one frontally facing window of modest width. This further serves to give the building vertical emphasis. The overall design is extremely expressionistic and relates closely to the "form follows function" spirit of the Chicago school. The ornament of the Fisher Building complements the architectural design.

The narrow piers and mullions, sheathed in pale salmon-colored terra cotta, have been deliberately designed without ornamental detail. The resulting prominence of these slim verticals creates a striking impression of height which is intensified in this photograph by the camera angle.

(Barbara Crane, photographer)



The cornice of the Fisher Building is encrusted with Gothic details. (Barbara Crane, photographer)

The lively terra cotta on the Fisher Building creates several visual effects. The material itself is speckled, giving it a fanciful, light quality. The majority of ornament is on the spandrels (main horizontal elements) thus successfully minimizing the banding effect which would be created by unadorned surfaces. The emphasis is drawn away from the spandrels to the simple, sleek verticals, accenting the building's height. Visually the ornament decreases the weight of the walls, creating what has been termed a "dematerialized" surface. This effect is particularly noticeable on the upper stories where great effort was apparently made to reduce the visual weight of the cornice. The building terminates in a flurry of ornamental detail, much like certain Gothic cathedrals.

The ornament, according to the 1896 article in *Inland Architect*, is taken from the fifteenth century Gothic style of Rouen and Bruges. The lower stories are studded with crabs, fish, shells, and other aquatic forms playing upon Fisher's name. The upper levels display a fantastic repertory of design, including trefoil and ogee arches, drapery, foliate patterns, salamanders, and even eagles. The profusion of airy decorative elements clearly expresses the nature of the structural system beneath; a particularly light and open steel framework. Charles Atwood produced a decidedly creative and fanciful design within the context of the Chicago school style.



The planning of the Fisher Building took into full consideration the proposed function of the structure, in the spirit of the Chicago school. The building was economical; it was constructed quickly and efficiently with little waste. The design utilized a maximum of available space. The projecting windows created additional floor area beyond the lot line of the building. The generously glazed oriels and the windows of the flush bays filled the entire span between structural members so that ample light was admitted to the interior. These and other well-planned features made the property most attractive to potential tenants.

The floor plan of the building was conceived in practicality. All offices have exterior light and are reached by short T-shaped corridors. Originally six "swift-running hydraulic passenger elevators of the most modern type [reached the office floors] in the shortest possible time." The ground level was subdivided into shops, with corridors from the three original street entrances leading to the elevators. Subsequent alterations in the lobby have changed the elevators; the 1907 addition added two more pairs facing one another across the longitudinal corridor to reach the new office space. Today the principal entrance is on Dearborn Street with a service door on Plymouth Court. The former main portal on Van Buren Street is now a store.

This recent photograph of the Fisher Building shows the addition's close relationship to the design of the original structure.  
(Barbara Crane, photographer)



A detail of the ornament found on the sixteenth story of the Fisher Building.  
(Barbara Crane, photographer)

The basic soundness of the 1896 design was affirmed by the addition. Its flat facade repeats the vertical divisions of the original building and extends the rectangular three-window pattern of the eighteenth floor through the next two where it terminates in a cornice matching the original, but lacking Atwood's ornamental cresting. The attention paid to details, important in the initial design, was carried through in the annex and in some of the earlier renovations. Some of the original trim, including seven-foot veined Italian marble wainscoting, and polished solid mahogany doors and woodwork, and intricately decorated doorknobs, has been preserved. The mosaic floors were retained on the second floor as was the open ornamental iron grillwork in the elevator shafts. The fish which decorate the Dearborn Street entrance doors are merely one remarkable detail of this building which Chicagoans may still enjoy today.

The Fisher Building is the logical extension of the direction which other Chicago school buildings along Dearborn Street had taken. Following the precepts of the style, the

frame determines the exterior appearance of the building. The extensive window area, set within an open grid framework, is characteristic of almost all subsequent high-rise construction, but more recent buildings often lack the decorative appeal of the Fisher Building. Charles Atwood, to whom the unusual design is attributed, died before the building was completed, and the firm of D. H. Burnham and Company reverted in subsequent projects to a more or less literal application of neoclassic ornament to commercial structures. Atwood's curiously progressive design marks one of the high points in the creative experimentation of the Chicago school of architecture.

*The Commission on Chicago Historical and Architectural Landmarks was established in 1968 by city ordinance, and was given the responsibility of recommending to the City Council that specific landmarks be preserved and protected by law. The ordinance states that the Commission, whose nine members are appointed by the Mayor, can recommend any area, building, structure, work of art, or other object that has sufficient historical, community, or aesthetic value. Once the City Council acts on the Commission's recommendation and designates a Chicago Landmark, the ordinance provides for the preservation, protection, enhancement, rehabilitation, and perpetuation of that landmark. The Commission assists by carefully reviewing all applications for building permits pertaining to designated Chicago Landmarks. This insures that any proposed alteration does not detract from those qualities that caused the landmark to be designated.*

*The Commission makes its recommendations to the City Council only after extensive study. As part of this study, the Commission's staff prepare detailed documentation on each potential landmark. This public information brochure is a synopsis of various research materials compiled as part of the designation procedure.*

Cover drawing is based on a photograph of the fish etched in three of the vestibule doors at the Dearborn Street entrance.